DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 063 596 CS 000 027

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TITLE Materials and Resources for the Gifted Reader at the Primary Level.
PUB DATE May 72
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the annual convention of International Reading Assn. (17th, Detroit, May 10-13, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Criterion Referenced Tests; *Elementary Grades; *Gifted; *Individualized Instruction; *Reading Instruction; Reading Level; Reading Skills

ABSTRACT

The teacher of gifted children must provide for individual differences in level and skills of reading, and allow opportunities for children to pursue their own interests. To avoid the destructive syndrome of wasted time and unnecessary rote review, the teacher should assign each child reading materials on the basis of his achievement level (rather than his grade level) and, using a criterion-referenced reading system, concentrate on those particular skills which the child has not yet mastered. This can be accomplished by designing tests and lessons for each specific reading objective--the teacher should initiate instruction only after first having ascertained what each child does not know. Using this approach, opportunities for new learning are maximized, and the teacher can insure children additional time for rewarding, independent work. (MF)

ED 063596

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Materials and Resources for the Gifted Reader at the Primary Level*

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Introduction

The most difficult and demanding task facing the elementary school teacher is also the one that is most important: adjusting instruction to the individual differences of children. Contrary to popular practice, this adjustment is not best accomplished by using one method with the children whose I.Q. is below 125 and another with those having I.Q.'s above 125. Some would suggest (1), for example, that non-gifted children should be given a basal reader method and the gifted should be given an individualized method. This approach of providing special materials to special groups of children sounds like a symptom of the grade-conscious orientation that Austin and Morrison (2) identified in their classical study of the teaching of reading. They noticed that:

> Too many elementary school teachers apparently have been unable to discard the concept that they are third or fourth grade teachers. Consequently, they feel compelled to teach the subject matter and skills which they consider suitable for their grades irrespective of differences that may exist among children. These teachers expect all the children in their classes to read from the same page of the same book.

The grade-conscious third grade teacher is very concerned that the children

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*Paper presented at International Reading Association Convention, Detroit, May 10, 1972, at Preconvention Institute XI, "Fostering Reading in the Gifted and Creative: The Role of Creative Reading."

work their way through the third grade book. The "gifted" children who complete the book before the end of the year get to do independent activities; until they are promoted to the fourth grade, at which time they will begin the fourth grade book.

I believe that this grade consciousness is in turn a symptom of a greater problem, materialism. Characteristically, we look to producers of material things to solve our non-material problems. We look to Detroit to solve the very transportation problems they were instrumental in creating. The fact that we devote forty per cent of our cities to the automobile will probably not be changed by making automobile engines that produce less pollution. If we want to do something about transportation then we must look at the basic process itself, and ask about the objectives of transportation and our needs relative to those objectives. The result of this examination may well be something so radical as banning the automobile.

In considering the topic of reading and the gifted we can avoid the usual consequences of our materialism if we begin with the basic objectives of reading, and then examine the needs relative to those objectives. We should avoid the rather natural materialistic tendency to ask, "What are the materials and resources suitable for gifted children?"

What are the basic objectives of reading? There are two areas, cognitive and affective. Relative to the cognitive area, we want children to become skillful readers. In the affective area we want them to use reading as a means of accomplishing ends that are important to them. Gifted children have special needs relative to the objectives of reading. Their cognitive development is so advanced that the materials and instructional activiities normally provided for children at their age and grade levels are so easy that they do not learn much. And, their affective development is generally such that they do not have to be "motivated"

to read, in the traditional sense. All they need is time and a purpose.

In the remainder of this paper I will deal with two areas relative to cognitive development--providing for differences in levels and skills--and with one area relative to affective development--providing opportunities for children to pursue interests.

Levels

Growth requires challenge. This is the whole idea behind the developmental sequence built into most instructional materials in reading. When you want to guide a child in developing his reading skills, you provide books that are sufficiently difficult to be challenging. Matching book difficulty to a child's individual level of skill development has been defined as instructional level. A child is reading at his instructional level when he is able to pronounce correctly ninety-three to ninety-eight per cent of the words, and is able to answer adequately between seventy-five and ninety per cent of the questions asked him. This particular match of book difficulty and child's skill is intended to provide an optimal setting for instruction, because this match encourages the child to grow in his use of reading skills.

Unfortunately, too few children are provided an appropriate challenge because their teachers take their cues from the labels on texts rather than from the children's individual skill development. The teachers mistakenly assume that the number four on a basal text means fourth grade, and they assign texts accordingly. The tendency to read labels rather than children is illustrated in a study of the basal text assignment of children that I conducted a couple of years ago. In one school district, which I shall call District A, the children were reading above the national average. In the other school district, District B, the children were reading below the national average. I asked the teachers in both school districts to tell me the standardized reading achievement scores and basal text assignments

of each child in their classroom. I assumed that a child was reading at an instructional level if his basal text assignment was no more than one year above or below his score on the standardized reading achievement tests given by the school district. Thus, if a child's reading achievement score was 3.5, he would be considered to be placed at his instructional level if he was assigned to a basal text having a level of 3, 4, or 5; and, placement in a sixth level book would be considered at a frustration level, and placement in a second level book would be considered at an independent level. Even with this wide range of instructional level, I discovered that about one-third of the children in District A (above national norms) were assigned at the independent level, with almost no children assigned at the frustration level. In District B (below national norms) the situation was just the reverse; about one-third of the children were assigned at the frustration level and almost none at the independent level. The same phenomenon would appear to be operating in both school districts: the teachers tended to assign children on the basis of grade level rather than achievement level.

The conclusion seems rather clear. If teachers are to provide instructional materials that encourage growth, then they must be ready to provide whatever books are at a child's instructional level. Many of the better readers, those we might call gifted, will require books two and more levels above their grade level. Some second grade children should be given sixth grade books, and some sixth grade children should be given college texts. The teacher can better challenge the gifted reader to grow a bit by basing text assignments upon achievement level rather than upon grade level.

Skills

After providing the child with a challenging level of reading book, the teacher must then become concerned with identifying the appropriate instructional exercises for each child's specific skill needs. The teacher is seriously

mistaken if he assumes that the child's specific skill needs are directly indicated by his general achievement score. The general reading achievement score is only an average of subtest scores. The very process of averaging often hides the actual variations in subtest scores. For example, John's reading achievement score is 6.8, but on the subtest for paragraph meaning he received 5.8 and for word meaning he received 7.8. Mary's reading achievement score is 4.3, while her paragraph meaning score is 3.6 and her word meaning score is 4.9. The teacher should realize that even the subtest scores for paragraph meaning and word meaning are in themselves derived by averaging specific items. John's paragraph meaning score of 5.8 probably hides a wide variation in his attainment of the specific skills that constitutes the large category called paragraph meaning.

When the teacher fails to identify the most appropriate instructional exercises for a child, and simply gives him the exercises other children are receiving with the justification that a little review never hurt anyone, the teacher is committing an error that is commonly made with gifted children. Of course a little review hurts the child: a child is always hurt when he is not learning. He is hurt because he is not gaining new skill, which he can use just as much as any other child. He is hurt because a rehashing of old material is always uninteresting. What the gifted child needs is what all children need, instruction that is appropriate for his particular needs.

The best way to provide the most appropriate instruction for specific reading skills objectives is to utilize a criterion-referenced system. Criterion-referencing is relating testing and teaching to specific skill objectives. It is accomplished by designing a test and a lesson for each specific objective. For example, there would be a separate test and lesson for each of these specific objectives:

1. phonic word attack-initial consonant b
2. phonic word attack-initial consonant d
3. phonic word attack-initial consonant t

The test for each specific skill objective would be given to the child. He will then receive the lesson for an objective only if he performs inadequately on the test for that objective. In this way the teacher is able to provide a child with only those specific lessons that are appropriate for him.

With a criterion-referenced system, the teacher orients instruction to the child's learning, rather than to her own teaching. Because most teachers are oriented to their own teaching, they have a hard time accepting the fact that a child could learn phonic word attack with the initial consonant b without ever having been taught it. Gifted children learn many things without formal teaching. That capacity for independent learning is, after all, what makes them gifted.

There are a number of criterion-referenced reading systems presently on the market, and one or two more appearing each year. But teachers need not depend upon the publishers to produce the materials, they can make their own. Many teachers have effectively developed criterion-referenced reading systems by cooperatively following the procedure of: (1) identifying a taxonomy of reading skills objectives; (2) assigning different teachers to design tests for a certain number of those objectives; (3) assigning teachers lessons and identify suitable instructional materials for a certain number of those objectives; and, finally, (4) producing these tests and lessons in sufficient quantity that each participating teacher has a complete set.

Pursue Interests

The teacher who utilizes a criterion-referenced reading system will find that children have more time to pursue their interests, because the children do not waste time doing unnecessary instructional exercises. The wasteful use of

both the children's and the teacher's time is a contributing factor to what Silberman has identified as the major failure of the public schools.

> It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms without being appalled by the mutilation visable everywhere--mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self. The public schools--those "killers of the dream," to appropriate a phrase of Lillian Smith's--are the kind of institutions one cannot really dislike until one gets to know them well. (3)

Teachers who have children doing instructional exercises they do not need, when the children could more profitably be spending their time pursuing interests, are surely deserving of being called, "killers of the dream." Unfortunately, the children whose dreams are most often killed are those we call gifted.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to make the case that the problem of materials and resources for the gifted reader at the primary level is not one of selection, but of use. We can best serve the gifted child by providing him only those materials that are appropriate for his reading achievement level and skill development. And further, we should provide those materials in a way that provides the child ample time to pursue his interests.

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